

THE FOUR LAST THINGS

INTRODUCTION

This paper is an abbreviation of the Leader's Guide to the Kingdom of God Study Course ((c) BRAINWAVES 2001), the aim of which is to present the basics of the Christian Faith in the light of the Bible's teaching about the coming Kingdom of God. These notes attempt to illuminate the particular stance adopted.

STANDPOINT

The course's fundamental premise is that God intends to set up His Kingdom upon earth, thereby bringing all things and all people under the authority of Jesus and so from Him under that of His Father;¹ that this is essentially what is meant in biblical teaching by the "redemption of the world"; and that it was to bring this about that Jesus when on earth set up His Church. As Jesus was sent by His Father to save and establish the Church, so He sends out His Church to conquer and rescue the world.²

So the course rejects the notion that all Christians are saved and everyone else damned. Rather, it is the function of the Christian Church - those who enjoy a personal relationship with God founded upon faith in Jesus through the Christian gospel - to rescue God's other creatures and indeed His whole world, all of which are objects of His love, from the many disasters (social, political, economic, military, moral, spiritual, medical, ecological, environmental and so forth) which would otherwise engulf and destroy us all.³

It is this rescue operation which is to establish God's kingdom, as Paul describes in Romans 8:18-23, where we read that

"the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God."⁴

This coming of God's kingdom is sometimes referred to as the "Day of the Lord", to which the whole Bible looks forward.⁵ So we read in the Old Testament that

¹ 1 Corinthians 15:24-28, Philipians 3:21; cf 2 Corinthians 10:5.

² So, in John 3:16 - perhaps the most famous verse in the New Testament - God sent His only Son because He so loved the world. Again, in His High Priestly prayer Jesus prays for His Church so that the world to whom He is sending them, even though it currently hates them, may come to recognise Him whom to know is eternal life. (John 17:18, 14, 21, 23, 3)

³ This understanding of God's purpose for His Church I find admirably explained in the chapter, "The Logic of Election", in Lesslie Newbigin's book, The Gospel in a Pluralist Society (London: SPCK 1989).

⁴ Romans 8:18 NRSV.

⁵ eg Isaiah 65:17-25, Malachi 4, 1 Corinthians 3:12-15; Hebrews 10:25; 2 Peter 1:19.

The Four Last Things

"The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea."⁶

In the course we refer to this event as "D-Day". We are commanded to be ready for it at all times, for it will come "like a thief in the night".⁷

The characteristics of the Kingdom are the essential subject matter of Jesus' teaching as recorded for us in the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. In particular He explains how we are to prepare for it in the manifesto assigned to the beginning of His ministry as the Sermon on the Mount, encapsulating this in the Beatitudes.

When it comes, the present order of things will be inverted: "The first shall be last and the last first";⁸ the greatest will be those who were previously the slaves of all;⁹ and the meek will inherit the earth.¹⁰ At the Last Judgement those who are still not related to God by faith will be identified as either "sheep" or "goats" and rewarded or punished accordingly as described by Jesus in Matthew 25.

THE FOUR LAST THINGS

The course is informed by the writer's personal understanding of biblical teaching on the Four Last Things - Death, Judgement, Heaven and Hell - on which opinions in the Church today vary widely. No explicit view is offered on such topics as the biblical "millennium" or the "rapture of the saints".

(1) **Heaven** is seen traditionally as the abode of God, Who grants entry to all who belong to Him. In the first instance these will include all who know Him by faith as did Paul's example Abraham, and specifically all believers in His Son Jesus, of which the gospels offer us an example in the penitent thief.¹¹ None such will be subject to the Last Judgement.¹²

(2) **Hell** : We distinguish between two different concepts which appear in the Bible:

(2a) "Sheol" (the "pit", Old Testament, Hebrew), or its New Testament (Greek) equivalent "Hades", is seen as the place of the departed. It is *not* generally portrayed as a place of

⁶ Habakkuk 2:14 NRSV; cf Isaiah 11:9.

⁷ 1 Thessalonians 5:2,4; 2 Peter 3:10; Revelation 16:15.

⁸ Matthew 19:30, 20:16; cf Luke 1:51-53 (the Magnificat).

⁹ Matthew 20:25-27, 23:11-12.

¹⁰ Matthew 5:5.

¹¹ Luke 23:40-43.

¹² John 5:24.

torment,¹³ but rather as the place of waiting to which in consequence of the Fall humanity is by default consigned at death until the Day of Judgement. It is therefore sometimes thought of as a prison,¹⁴ a place from which God is absent, over which Satan, the prince of death, reigns and from which he willingly grants release to none. But for the Cross we might have been confined there for ever.

(2b) "Gehenna", the hell or "lake"¹⁵ of fire, was originally intended only for the devil and his angels, but is said by Jesus to be the destination of all those designated "goats" at the Last Judgement.¹⁶ These last are identified in the course as the "bad apples", the "weeds" in the Parable of the Weeds¹⁷ - the human causes of all the trouble, whom it will not be possible to isolate and eradicate until the end of the age.

(3) **Death** in the Bible is the universal human predicament. It is what Adam and Eve were warned of before the Fall.¹⁸ Its reign continued, says Paul, "from Adam to Moses".¹⁹ And it constitutes "the wages of sin"²⁰ even today. It is from death, and consequent permanent consignment to *Hades*, that Jesus came to save us, by conquering Satan and death Himself. We understand that since His resurrection a first separation is made at death between those who already belong to God by *faith* as in (1) above, who are welcomed like the penitent thief to "paradise" (heaven) and those others who await final judgement in Hades.

(4) At the **Last Judgement** those still in Hades - ie those not related to God by *faith* - are divided as described by Jesus in Matthew 25 into "sheep" and "goats" according to what they have *done*; and in particular by the way they have treated Jesus' "brethren" (His Church of disciples²¹) in times of crisis or suffering. The "sheep" are welcomed to heaven even though they may never even have encountered Jesus Himself before, the "goats" despatched to Gehenna; both will be surprised.²²

(5) That the Last Judgement will be made in terms of people's *works* - whether they have done good or ill - is the consistent teaching of Our Lord, St Paul and St John, the author of Revelation.²³

¹³ The only exception known to the writer is the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31, but this is generally held not to be Our Lord's definitive account of the after life. For one thing, He himself does not appear in it, either as Judge of the rich man or as Saviour of Lazarus. The consensus view seems to be that Jesus has adopted a contemporary picture as a vehicle for His own moral teaching.

¹⁴ eg 1 Peter 3:18-20, 4:6.

¹⁵ Revelation 20:14-15.

¹⁶ Matthew 25:41.

¹⁷ Matthew 13:24-30,36-43.

¹⁸ Genesis 2:17

¹⁹ Romans 5:14.

²⁰ Romans 3:23.

²¹ Matthew 12:48-50, 28:10.

²² cf. Matthew 7:21-23.

²³ So Matthew 16:27; Romans 2:6-11; Revelation 20:12-3.

(6) Hades will then be empty, and no one will any more be subject to death. So death and Hades will be destroyed, as celebrated in the great old Welsh Hymn, Cwm Rhondda,

"Death of death, and hell's destruction".²⁴

(7) A major part of Jesus' victory by His Cross and resurrection was the conquest of Satan, who had the power of death and Hades,²⁵ but was unable to detain Jesus in His "three day prison".

CHRISTOS ANESTE!

(8) By vanquishing Satan, death and Hades, Jesus made eternal LIFE and immortality available.²⁶ This good news of our own resurrection, with death no longer the end, was a principle element in the proclamation of the early Church.²⁷

(9) In saying all this we deny two commonly found extreme and opposing positions:

(i) Universalism, which maintains that none will end in Gehenna. This seems to contradict flatly the teaching of Jesus on the fate of the "goats" and His other references to Gehenna, as well as other parts of the New Testament.²⁸

(ii) Exclusivism, which maintains that all who at the point of death are not Christians will be consigned to Gehenna. The writer believes that this view is very largely a confusion between the two "hells", Hades and Gehenna. Further, it renders redundant the Last Judgement at which God "will judge the secret thoughts of all",²⁹ and which Paul commands us not to pre-empt,³⁰ as Jesus Himself taught in the Parable of the Weeds. Finally, it appears also to be at variance with the universal *blessing* upon all generations of humankind, the declaration of unending benevolence, made by God in His covenant with Noah after the Flood.³¹

Martin Mosse,

January 2002

²⁴ So Revelation 20:14; 1 Corinthians 15:26, 54-55.

²⁵ Hebrews 2:14-15, 1 John 3:8.

²⁶ 2 Timothy 1:10.

²⁷ Acts 4:2, 23:6, 24:15,21, 26:8; Romans 6:5; 1 Corinthians 15; Hebrews 6:2. Some got so excited by this that they thought it had already happened (2 Timothy 2:18)! The fact of resurrection was a particular bone of contention between Jesus and the Saducees (Matthew 22:23-32).

²⁸ Matthew 5:22,29,30, 10:28, 18:9, 23:15,33; 2 Thessalonians 1:9; Revelation 20:15.

²⁹ Romans 2:16 NRSV.

³⁰ 1 Corinthians 4:5.

³¹ Genesis 8:21-9:17.